

## FLAG DAY

Following 9/11, Americans in record numbers proudly displayed the nation's flag. As time passed, the numbers decreased, but with the onset of the Iraqi war, Americans once again proudly flew the Stars and Stripes. Although it is not officially recognized as a federal holiday, Americans everywhere will celebrate the birthday of our flag on June 14<sup>th</sup> and show their patriotism by participating in various flag activities.

According to historical legend, in June 1776, George Washington commissioned a Philadelphia seamstress, Betsy Ross, to create a flag for our new nation. On June 14, 1777, the Second Continental Congress adopted a flag with thirteen strips, alternate red and white, and a field of blue with thirteen white stars. There have been twenty-seven versions of the flag over the years with additional stars being added as new states joined the nation.

Over the years, America's military have proudly carried Old Glory into battle. For many of us probably the most memorable part of the Apollo 11 landing on the moon was watching Astronauts Neil Armstrong and "Buzz" Aldrin proudly plant the nylon 3' x 5' symbol of our nation on the lunar surface. Little did we realize what an engineering feat that was.

NASA engineers had to design a flagpole with a horizontal bar allowing the flag to "fly" in the absence of atmosphere and a protective shroud to encase the flag and allow it to survive temperatures of up to 2000 degrees F for 13 seconds during descent and touchdown. The assembly had to be compact and yet easy to assemble in space suits with gloves.

My favorite flag story, however, involves the designer of our current flag 45 years ago, Robert Heft. Heft travels thousands of miles annually to spread the story of how he designed the flag and to spread the gospel of patriotism. He delightfully entertains audiences with his story of what began as a high school project back in 1958 in Lancaster, Ohio. Heft was shy back then - "the type of kid to sit in the back of the class," he says. But he had a huge interest in politics and closely followed the debate on Alaska and Hawaii becoming states. He correctly deduced that both states would actually achieve statehood because one was a Republican state and one Democrat, and thus concentrated his efforts on designing a flag with 50 stars.

Heft spent 12 and ½ hours one weekend carefully arranging and sewing a new combination of stars in 5 rows of six stars alternating with 4 rows of five. His mother assisted him in his efforts because he really did not know how to use a needle and thread, but she feared that the project would be seen as desecrating the flag. The project only earned a B minus, because his teacher, Stanley Pratt, said that the project lacked originality and anyone could make a flag. He did, however, agree to raise the grade if

Heft could get Congress to accept the design. Heft took up the challenge, and the rest is history.

The flag which made Heft famous has been flown over every state capitol building and over many US embassies. It is the only flag in American history to have flown over the White House under five administrations. Heft's flag is faded and soiled from frequent display, and yet he repeatedly turns down offers to sell it.

What happens if we add a 51<sup>st</sup> state? No need to worry. Heft actually designed a 51- star version of our flag a few weeks after he completed his school project. That flag has six rows of stars, beginning with a row of nine and alternating by rows of eight. Heft is ready to step forward and become the first person in our nation's history to design two of its flags. In the meantime, he is happy to share the story of his first flag with people all over the world. So, as we celebrate Flag Day this year and marvel at our beautiful symbol of freedom, we thank a shy young man for his weekend efforts in creating the flag we fly today.

By Senator Bev Hammerstrom  
17<sup>th</sup> District